DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 117 732 CS 202 484

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TITLE Hey, Mom, Who Put the Television in the Closet?
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (65th, San Diego, California, November 26-29, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Problems; *Children; Elementary Education; *Environmental Influences; Programing (Broadcast); *Publicize; *Television; *Television Commercials; Viewing Time

ABSTRACT

Results of the staggering number of hours which children spend watching television (an average of 54 hours a week for a preschooler, who will have accumulated a total of 5000 hours by first grade) may be seen in the influence children--swayed by commercials--have over their mothers' grocery choices and in the dramatic increase of both wild behavior and extreme passivity of school children. During the Saturday morning hours of tawdry animated cartoons, children are bombarded with frequent interruptions for commercials advertising artificially flavored and colored snacks, candy, cereals, soft drinks, and flashy toys. (Only three countries in the world allow any advertising with children's programs and only the United States allows more advertising with children's programs than with adult programs.) Furthermore, children--even very young ones--spend the bulk of their viewing time watching adult programs, most of which feature violence, crime, mystery, and brutality. There are a number of effective steps which schools, teachers, and parents may and must take to reduce children's viewing time and to promote critical and selective viewing among children. (JM)

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FOR RELEASE SUNDAY, 30 NOVEMBER 1975

HEY, MOM, WHO PUT THE TELEVISION IN THE CLOSET?

[An address by Dr. Nancy Larrick at the general session of the Elementary School Division, National Council of Teachers of English, on 29 November]

It is a beautiful, sunny morning here in San Diego. As we have come into this room, we have chatted and laughed with old friends and new--all of us enjoying the give-and-take of comradeship at a great conference.

But at any one minute of this Saturday morning, we know that at least 10 million American children under 12 are sitting immobilized before the television screen. Before the day is over, 75 percent of all children in TV homes will have watched at least one program. Today 97 percent of the homes in the United States have at least one television set which is turned on five to six hours a day. That is more than 66.2 million homes, more than have telephones or flush toilets.

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These Saturday morning hours are aptly called "the children's ghetto." During this period, children's programming and children's advertising have segregated the 44 million viewers under 12 from the rest of the TV audience. It is an area of intellectual impoverishment and distortion.

What the children see is a noisy jangle of tawdry animated cartoons interrupted frequently by animated commercials which advertise artificially flavored and artificially colored snacks, candy, sugared cereals, and soft drinks along with flashy toys of questionable value. As Bill Greeley of Variety wrote, "The programming has a lot of junk for tots' heads and the commercials have a lot of junk for their stomachs."

The Dutch Advertising Council permits no advertising with children's programs and has banned all ads for sweet foods before 8 p.m. Indeed, only three countries in the world permit any advertising with children's television programs: Japan, England, and the United States. We are the only nation permitting more commercials with children's programs than with adult programs.

The code of the National Association of Broadcasters stipulates there may be up to 12 minutes of commercials per hour in children's weekend television, and 8 to 10 minutes in adult evening programs. However, only 60 percent

of the nation's broadcasters adhere to this code. Since the NAB has no enforcement procedures and since violations of the voluntary code cannot cause a station's license to be revoked by the FCC, these so-called restrictions are far from firm.

The NAB does not suggest any limitation on the number of different products advertised to children during the prescribed 12 minutes. A recording of one 20-minute segment of a CBS Saturday morning schedule showed three program interruptions to advertise a total of eight different products:

Nutter Butter Peanut Sandwich cookies
Captain Krunch Peanut Butter cereal
Adams ice cream flavored gum
Super Sugar Crisp
Alpha Bits
Baby Alive (she eats and drinks)
Nestle Choco'Lites
Hunt's Snack Pack Chocolate Pudding

At that rate, four hours of the "children's ghetto" could dangle 90 to 95 products before the traumatized audience of children under 12.

Robert B. Choate of the Council on Children, Merchandising and the Media says: "If a child watches

just three hours of Saturday morning television, two hours of Sunday children's television, and one hour each weekday of Captain Kangaroo, he will see over 5,000 messages per year trying to sell him something to eat."

Kellogg, the largest weekend advertiser, spends $9,000,000 a year on weekend children's television; Mattel, toy and game manufacturer, spends almost $8,000,000, and General Mills spends more than $7,000,000.

This is big business. "Children's programming is the most profitable area of television programming," says Dr. Alan Pearce, an economist with the FCC.

Some of the profit is due to the fact that children's programs and commercials cost less than those for adults. Many use what is called limited animation (four drawings per frame instead of the usual 64). Further, short animated segments are planned to fit interchangeably into any episode in a series. In the future, development of mechanized animation through the use of computers will save still more money. Finally, because of the expanding international market, the use of English words will probably be minimized and there will be a general substitution of action for words.

Most children's programs are rerun indefinitely, but new commercials are constantly being shown. This is because the whole industrial process is based on advertising with

short-run emotional effect. The sale of fads and short-lived merchandise requires frequent replacement and continuing growth of new products and new ads for survival.

Many of the foods and toys advertised on television were created just for children's TV. Robert B. Choate told the Senate Subcommittee on Consumers that manufacturers promote cereals with the least nutritional value ~~for~~ to children. One colorful example was Frankenberry, a purple cereal, highly sugared, with purple marshmallows in it. No wonder that 98 percent of the children in the United States have decaying teeth!

Although very young children cannot distinguish conceptually between programming and advertising, the Federal Trade Commission has defended the relentless advertising on children's programs as the opportunity for children to "learn about the free enterprise system." But, as the advertising people say, "Our primary goal is to sell products to children, not to educate them." Thus the child of 2 to 12 is forced into an intellectual contest with an advertising agency.

Evidently the advertisers are winning.

In one survey of Los Angeles families a few years ago, the majority of mothers interviewed reported that 90 percent of their children were singing TV advertising jingles by age 3. Eighty-seven percent of their pre-school children

were asking for food items seen on TV, and 91 percent were asking for toys they had met through television.

The impact on parents is described in some detail by Melvin Helitzer and Carl Heyel in their book addressed to advertisers: The Youth Market: Its Dimensions, Influence and Opportunities for You. Let me quote:

> Children can be very successful naggers. By and large parents quite readily purchase products urged upon them by their youngsters. In Helitzer's Advertising research, it was found that a parent will pay 20 percent more for an advertised product with child appeal--even when a less expensive, non-advertised product is no different. . . .Mothers surveyed indicate that because their children ask for specific products and brands, they spend an average of $1.66 more per household weekly. Thus "child-power" adds at least $30 million weekly, or $1.5 billion annually, to grocery retail sales--just to make Junior happy.

Those figures published in 1970 do not, of course, reflect the inflated prices of 1975, the increased number of homes with television sets, or the intensified emotional pressures which advertisers are putting on their child viewers.

Television advertisements often show children giving ecstatic endorsement of various products. For example:

> Ever since I got my new Snoopy pencil sharpener, my life hasn't been the same. A kid's best friend is his Snoopy pencil sharpener.

But not necessarily. Another child huckster declares:

> A kid's best friend is M&M's chocolate candies.

Not satisfied to show lingering pictures of the prizes offered, an advertiser may also show a child winner sobbing for joy over his or her winnings.

"Be the first kid on your block" is called the tested and proved persuader by Helitzer and Heyel as they urge advertisers to convert each child into an intra-family sales force.

"Everything points to the intensification of such practices," says Dr. William Melody of the University of Pennsylvania, author of Children's TV: The Economics of Exploitation. To make the child effective in his role as "active lobbyist for the advertiser," he says, "it becomes desirable in some instances to plan children's programming to repel and exclude adults so they will be unaware of the nature of the advertising effort and therefore less resistant to their children's lobbying."

The most effective way to reach the child as potential

family salesman is through the super-hero or miracle worker, Helitzer and Heyl say. "The character should be adventurous. And he should be on the right side of the law," they explain. Then they elaborate: "A child must be able to mimic his hero, whether he is James Bond, Superman, or Dick Tracy; to be able to fight and shoot to kill without punishment or guilt feelings."

Apparently advertisers have followed this advice, for 71 percent of the Saturday morning children's programs have at least one example of human violence. (Australia has nothing comparable, I was told recently by a representative of the government-owned Australian Broadcasting System. "We offer no television programs for children on Saturday," she said. "That is the time when our children go out to play.")

Most of our children pass up outdoor play on Saturday for television viewing. In one community a recent survey of 228 fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders showed that the average viewing time on Saturday is eight hours. Fourth-graders classified in this survey as having "low reading ability" spend 10 hours watching television on Saturday, and their counterparts in the fifth grade watch for 9.5 hours on Saturday. These elementary school students--low, middle, and high-level readers--average five hours per school day watching television.

Preschoolers throughout the nation watch television an average of 54 hours a week. By the time a child enters first grade, he or she has seen 5,000 hours of television. By age 16, the total is 15,000 hours. The average adult spends 10 full years of his life watching television.

With almost no children's television programs in the after-school hours, the young television fan turns to adult programs where no holds are barred except in the 7 to 9 p.m. family hour, now under attack from the industry.

Although the commercials are not so frequent in adult programs, the pitch is equally exaggerated and often completely phoney. The child who lacks the experience to resist the advertiser's hard sell may actually believe that one squirt of deodorant will transform a person from failure to success; that various drugs will give relief in 30 seconds, and that ownership of a luxury car or wall-to-wall carpeting will provide the status that every family yearns for.

Even very young children spend the bulk of their viewing time with adult shows, many of which would be X-rated by any standard. Violence, crime, mystery, and brutality are the bones and sinews of most of these programs.

In 74 hours of prime-time viewing during one week of 1971, the Christian Science Monitor recorded 217 incidents of violence and 125 killings and murders in full view of

the audience, which of course included children. A study in 1972 at the University of Arizona showed that by age 14 an American TV viewer has seen 18,000 human beings killed on television. I have found no surveys showing any improvement since these two studies. No wonder that Karl E. Meyer writes in this week's issue of Saturday Review about "the nightly bloodbath on prime-time TV."

What is this doing to us as people--both children and adults?

Richard L. Tobin, also of Saturday Review, gives this answer:

> What is happening to the average family is a kind of creeping narcosis that eventually dulls any original sense of values and makes of young and old observers instead of participants, robots instead of reasoning beings, conformists, not individuals. Add in the disastrous element of never-ending violence and we've got ourselves a monumental sociological problem.

The problem reveals itself vividly at school where teachers of young children report a dramatic increase of both wild behavior and extreme passivity. Recurrent choruses of "I'm Batman . . . I'm Superman . . . I'm a monster . . .

Pow! Pow! Chop! Chop!" show that children are reenacting what they have seen on television. Yet in the next moment they may not be able to distinguish between fantasy and reality--as when one boy smashed his fist through a window in imitation of a television hero. Recently a young mother came out of the A&P with her five-year-old and saw a cop standing near her parked car. The policeman stepped aside promptly so she could open the door, but as the mother drove off, the little girl asked, "Why didn't he shoot us?"

Teachers tell me that many children in the primary and middle grades are tense and restless, with a short attention span and little drive to attend to details and finish a project. Dr. Dorothy H. Cohen of the Bank Street College of Education reports: "Teacher feedback in the primary grades shows that they are finding strong resistance among children not only to reading but to exerting any effort. Something is happening to children in their ability to do." Mary Reely, a teacher at the Horace Mann School for Nursery Years in New York, comments: "Nothing comes from inside--they're not motivated because they're so used to being entertained."

Until the last few years, both parents and teachers have gone along with the television tide, coping as best they could with the effects of television on their children,

but seldom dealing with the causes. In some homes the television set has become babysitter and parent substitute. The working mother in a one-parent home feels her latchkey child is safer watching television alone after school than he would be if left to his own devices at home or on the street. Watching television is better than playing with matches or the electric meat grinder, she reasons. And she may be right. But the same philosophy of leaving the child to television prevails in many homes where adults are present but reject the questions, the interruptions, and even the presence of their children. As Dr. Edward de Avila puts it: "Television is in the role of default leadership."

Teachers, school administrators, and their professional organizations have generally stepped aside in recent years from television and its increasing onslaught on children.

When television was young, studies were made of children's favorite programs and their effect on reading. Twenty-five years ago "Hopalong Cassidy" and "Howdy Doody" were staples of early childhood. By 1956 "Disneyland" was the favorite of both children and adults. By 1967, children's favorite programs included "The Green Hornet," "The Fugitive," "The Man from UNCLE," and "Star Trek." Each year has seen more sensational, more violent programs directed to children or watched by them in the adult hours.

In the sixties the Child Study Association, the Association for Childhood Education International, and the National Council of Teachers of English published excellent pamphlets suggesting ways to make the most of television's good features and to counter its negative influence. These pamphlets have not been updated, although the whole television scene has changed radically and more and more children are being harmfully influenced.

An International Reading Association pamphlet published in 1973 makes this proposal: "When parents ask, 'How can I help my child in reading?', have a list of quality television programs to offer them along with your other suggestions." Not surprisingly the subtitle of this pamphlet is, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

This is another example of television "in the role of default leadership."

One school has taken a stand. This is the Horace Mann School for Nursery Years in New York where the principal, Eleanor Brussel, and the teachers wrote to parents last April asking them to limit children's TV viewing to one hour a day, to monitor the choice of television programs, and to cease taking youngsters to disaster movies, such as "The Towering Inferno," "Earthquake," and "The Godfather," which had cropped up frequently in conversation and play.

It was a masterful letter--the result of six weeks of drafts and redrafts. Most of the parents responded with enthusiasm and gratitude. At last they had some guidance, some support in what had been a running battle at home. The New York Times interviewed a number of these parents who told of their uncertainties before receiving the school's letter and their delight in the changes apparent in their children after only a few weeks. One of the teachers said, "There has been a dramatic change in the last month. There's no more talk about Kung Fu, no more fights. The children are just simply more relaxed, more comfortable."

Dorothy H. Cohen, in her remarkable book, The Learning Child, suggests three steps parents can take "to thwart the endless exposure to violence, sex with violence, and the continuous seduction of their children into helpless supporters of the economy. They can apply strict censorship of what their children may view when they themselves are not present; they can teach their children to be critical viewers, especially of commercials; and they can begin to tackle the big job of changing the fare offered to children."

Whether parents take such a leadership role away from the television set may depend upon the guidance of teachers and the school as a whole. As a start for parents, teachers, and school administrators, I recommend monitoring the 4-hour

Saturday morning programming for children. Stay with one network and record each time the program changes or a cluster of commercials interrupts. List the products being pushed and note the sales pitch and the reasoning behind each hard sell. If possible, watch with one or more children and notice their responses. What incidents or language do they find comical? What episodes seem funny or horrifying to you but not to the children?

Ask the children in your class about their TV viewing. How often do they watch and for how long? What programs do they like best? What situations do they recommend as funny? What programs do they find frightening? Older children may be able to keep a daily log for a week, noting the programs watched and the time spent.

While children are researching and recording their viewing habits, take time to read The Family Guide to Children's Television: What to Watch, What to Miss, What to Change and How to Do It, written by Evelyn Kaye under the guidance of Action for Children's Television with the cooperation of the American Academy of Pediatrics and published by Pantheon in 1974. Then read Children's TV: The Economics of Exploitation, written by William Melody for Action for Children's Television and published by Yale University Press (1973).

Armed with information about the national television scene and with knowledge of individual children, you have what responsible parents have been looking for. A carefully worded letter to parents is one way to begin. Or you may wish first to recruit two or three sympathetic parents and reach others through them. Conferences with individual parents will be helpful, too. And it may be important to set up a group discussion to bring out the good and bad features of television, and their effect on children.

The big commitment is to limit the child's TV viewing; and that means evaluating programs, making decisions, and keeping to the limited schedule. Teachers can help by suggesting quality programs and identifying the violent and frightening shows. They can also suggest alternate entertainment to fill the hours previously devoured by television: outdoor play, jogging, and sports; special building projects; music, art, and dance; reading aloud and storytelling; caring for and playing with pets--and so on. Often a classroom project can be designed to flow easily into a home project, as when first-graders taped their story for a wordless picture book and took the idea home for another story and another taping. Or when fourth-graders, studying folklore, made a search for superstitions held by family and friends.

To be effective, such undertakings should include the children--even very young children. Five- and six-year-olds can become decision makers and very wise ones, too. After long discussion of sweet snacks and dental caries, the kindergarten children in the Parkland School near Allentown, Pennsylvania, asked for carrots and apples with their milk instead of Keebler's chocolate chip cookies. When the cafeteria management persisted with the cookies, the children responded, "No, thank you. We don't want cavities."

Given some background information, elementary school children have become dedicated defenders of the earth and bitter adversaries of pollution. The same kind of discriminating protest could be directed to the television choices at home. Many a child can become his own monitor of television viewing and program selection. But children and their parents need the guidance of teachers who are aware of television's impact and who are determined to make an imaginative outreach so children may grow in wisdom and in beauty.

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